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ABSTRACT

This policy paper is the second in a Southern Regional Educational Board (SREB) series on accountability reporting. This paper describes several problems states have encountered in their initial school report-card efforts, some of the lessons they have learned, and some of the questions that must be answered. Following the introduction, the first section presents information on data collection and verification, with a focus on the kind of information being reported, information management, issues concerning individual school reporting, and the shift to higher standards. Section 2 describes how the southern states establish standards that reflect higher expectations for student performance, determine who sets the standards, and demonstrate progress over time for all students. Suggestions for designing a useful school report that is relevant to its audience are offered in section 3, which also discusses the processes for interpreting the results and taking action on them. The final section outlines several lessons learned, first emphasizing that simply reporting outcomes without also designing ways to use the results will be of little benefit. One table presents data on the type of information reported on selected indicators of student performance by state. (LMI)

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School Accountability Reports

LESSONS LEARNED IN SREB STATES

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EA 024 895

School Accountability Reports

LESSONS LEARNED IN SREB STATES

Gale F. Gaines
Lynn M. Cornett

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SREB

Southern Regional Education Board

BY THE YEAR 2000—

All states and localities will have schools with improved performance and productivity demonstrated by results.

Goals for Education
CHALLENGE 2000

"When it was decided to require all public school systems to make available annual reports, a better informed public was envisioned. But a check of school systems shows the reports generally end up gathering dust in file cabinets."

Newspaper article, 1992

WHAT WILL IT TAKE FOR SCHOOL PROFILES TO BE USEFUL?

When legislatures and state boards of education set policies that require annual profiles or "report cards" for each school, the intent is–as one state law expressed it–to "inform the public on the quality and achievement of the public schools." But there is a second agenda as well. By drawing attention to the performance of schools and their students, schools can be held accountable for what they do–and for what they fail to do.

To be useful, school report cards must provide information for accountability purposes, and information that can lead to improvements in the schools. Reports must answer key questions. Are schools meeting standards? Is progress toward goals being made? Good school report cards must clearly show whether students are learning more, whether fewer students are dropping out, whether more students are mastering challenging coursework, and other clear indicators of progress.

But it is not enough for school report cards to have the right information. They must also be accessible and useful to those with an interest in educational improvement. States, districts, and schools must find ways for the public, businesses, and educators to use school reports as tools to help create maximum impact as they work to improve schools.

If the information in school reports does not lead to action, then the significant time, money, and effort required to prepare and publish them is poorly invested.

As state leaders examine the viability of their school report card systems, they might also consider whether the information needed for accountability differs from the information needed to bring about improvements. Developing report cards that can serve a dual purpose–accountability *and* school improvement–is a challenge. Meeting that challenge is important to satisfy public policymakers who demand clear evidence of results as a "trade-off" for shifting more decision-making to local schools.

Every SREB state has some form of accountability reporting–a "report card" or "profile"–on its education system. Most began with state and district reports. Most states now produce profiles on individual

schools as well. Among the SREB states, Florida and South Carolina were the first to report on individual schools. Alabama, Louisiana, Mississippi, Texas, and West Virginia have also issued several school-by-school reports. Florida (in 1991) and Mississippi (in 1992) passed legislation requiring the development of new reports. In 1992, the first school-by-school reports were released in Maryland, Oklahoma, and Virginia. The results of Kentucky's new assessment program are being released over several months in the fall of 1992. The first school accountability reports are expected in January 1993.

Laws passed in 1988 in Georgia and in 1992 in North Carolina and Tennessee call for the development of school reports. Tennessee has issued the first edition of district reports that also contain test results for each school, and "value added" assessment information will be available by July 1994. Arkansas passed legislation in 1989 that specifies school reports "where feasible."

While most states produced an initial set of school report cards, the challenge has been to improve on these early efforts. States that are now publishing second or third editions have refined their reporting methods. These states have taken a hard look at what should be reported and many have sought the comments of groups outside education to help create a reporting system that will allow assessment information to be used both by educators and others in the community.

To promote regional cooperation and assistance to member states, the Southern Regional Education Board convened a meeting of business leaders and legislators who sponsored early "report card" laws. Those who attended were asked to review initial report cards from several states and comment on how well the reports met their expectations. In another meeting, staff members who serve in state legislatures and state departments of education considered the initial reports, discussed their early efforts, and identified policy questions arising from these first reports. The issues raised from state to state were similar. Some SREB states with several years of experience were able to report on their progress in resolving problems.

The discussions centered around three broad areas: the collection and use of data; the setting of standards; and the usefulness of published reports. Common questions about school reports included:

- What is being reported?
- What problems arise when information and data are reported school-by-school?
- Who sets standards and expectations?
- What comparisons are made?
- Who are the customers?
- How can reports be used for school improvement?

This policy paper is the second in an SREB series on accountability reporting. The 1991 report, ***Report Cards for Education: Accountability Reporting in SREB States,*** presented information about initial efforts to report on school performance in states and districts. This paper describes several problems states have encountered, some of the lessons they have learned, and some of the questions that need to be answered when policymakers begin to plan for individual school reports.

QUESTIONS ABOUT DATA AND INFORMATION

- What is being reported in school report cards?
- Are systems in place to collect and verify data? Are common definitions used in collecting the data?
- What are advantages and disadvantages of reporting individual school data?

Data collection and verification are crucial to producing school report cards in which people will have confidence. Useful, reliable reports begin with a core of common information. Yet, in preparing early reports, states have found that local and state school systems do not always collect the same data, and they often lack common definitions for what is to be reported.

Nationally, efforts are underway to adopt standard definitions for collecting data. The National Center for Education Statistics is working with states to adopt common definitions in a number of areas. As one result of this project, comparable state-by-state dropout data by grade will be available for the first time in spring 1993. As states adopt these standard definitions, the quality of information available for use in school report cards will improve significantly.

States and school systems use a wide variety of tests to measure student achievement. The first truly comparable state-by-state achievement test data were released last year by the National Assessment of Educational Progress, which reported on how 8th graders in 37 states and the District of Columbia fared in mathematics. In early 1993, the National Assessment will release data on the mathematics performance of 4th and 8th graders, and reading performance of 4th graders in more than 40 states, including all of the SREB states.

What Is Being Reported?

State and district reports continue to include what many consider "input" measures, including school and community characteristics, student information, the number and qualifications of teachers, and finances. Available measures of student performance are also reported. Most reports include more than one year of data.

Individual school reports are likely to contain less "input" data. Among the information commonly reported are student attendance rates and enrollment, pupil/teacher ratios, and information on teachers and administrators, including average salaries, years of experience, and highest degree earned. Very little financial data–spending per student or types of expenditures (instruction, administration, etc.)–are included, except in Texas, which reports individual school financial information as a part of its Academic Excellence Indicator System. Student performance data typically include the results of standardized testing, college entrance examination scores, dropout rates, and participation in advanced academic programs.

How Is Information Collected and Verified?

States have used various means to collect data for the scores of statistical reports

INDIVIDUAL SCHOOL ACCOUNTABILITY REPORTS: Type of Information Reported on Selected Indicators of Student Performance and Achievement

State/Report	State Testing Program Results	Nationally Normed Test Results *	SAT and ACT Results	Advanced Study/Diploma	Dropout Rates
Alabama Annual Status Report	Percent of students passing graduation examination on first attempt by sub-test	Percent of students in grades 4 and 8 scoring high, middle, and low when compared to similar students' scores on an ability test	Number of students tested and average composite scores on ACT	Percent of graduates with advanced diploma; percent of students in grades 9 through 12 enrolled in advanced math and science; percent of students in grades 11 and 12 enrolled in Advanced Placement courses	
Arkansas	Individual School Reporting Where Feasible				
Florida School Improvement Reports (Under Development - 1991 Law)	Number and percent of students tested, median percentile ranks, and percent of students in the upper and lower quartiles by sub-test and by race and gender for grades 4, 7, and 10; number and percent passing graduation examination by race and gender; number and percent of students taking writing assessment and average scores for grades 4, 8, and 10 by race and gender		Number and percent of students taking ACT or SAT and the average composite score by race and gender	Number and percent of students completing Advanced Placement courses and scoring 3 or higher by race and gender; number and percent of high school students completing college courses (dual-enrollment); number and percent of seniors earning Academic Scholars Certificates or Vocational Gold Seal Diplomas by race and gender; number and percent of students passing upper level courses by subject	Number and percent of students for grades 9 through 12 by race and gender
Georgia	School Reports Under Development (1988 Law)				
Kentucky	School Reports Under Development (1990 Law)				
Louisiana School Progress Profile	Percent of students meeting state performance standard by sub-test for grades 3, 5, and 7, and for the graduation examination	Percent of students scoring in each national quartile by sub-test for grades 4, 6, and 9	Average composite score on the ACT		Number and percent of students *by grade* for grades 7 through 12
Maryland Sample School Report	Number of students tested, percent passing, and comparison to state standard for first-time takers and grade 11 status by race and gender				Percent of students in grades 9 through 12 by race and gender, comparison to state-adopted standard
Mississippi	New School Reports Under Development (1992 Law)				
North Carolina	School Reports Under Development (1992 Law)				

INDIVIDUAL SCHOOL ACCOUNTABILITY REPORTS (Continued)

State/Report	State Testing Program Results	Nationally Normed Test Results *	SAT and ACT Results	Advanced Study/Diploma	Dropout Rates
Oklahoma School Indicators Report		Number of students tested; percentile score by sub-test for grades 3, 5, 7, 9, and 11; percentile scores in writing for grades 7 and 10	Number of students tested and average composite ACT score		Number of students by race for each school
South Carolina School Performance Report	Number of students tested, percent meeting state-adopted standard and percentile rank (state and similar school) by sub-test for grades 6 and 8	Number of students tested, scores, percent above the 50th percentile, percent at or below the 25th percentile, and percentile rank (state and similar school) by sub-test for grade 7			Percent of students for grades 7 and 8, and 9 through 12; state percentile rank and rates by quartile
Tennessee 21st Century Schools Report Card (Under Development - 1992 Law)	Stanine scores by sub-test for each grade in grades 2 through 8 and in grade 10				
Texas Academic Excellence Indicator System	Percent of students passing and mastering by sub-test, race, gender, and for economically disadvantaged for grades 3, 5, and 9, and on graduation examination		Percent of students taking ACT or SAT, percent at or above 25 on the ACT or 1,000 on the SAT by race and gender	Percent in advanced courses and percent with advanced seal on transcript by race and gender, and for ESL,† LEP,§ and economically disadvantaged	Percent of students for grades 7 through 12 by race, gender, ESL, LEP, and special education
Virginia Outcome Accountability Project	Percent of students in grade 6 passing all 3 literacy tests on the first try	Percent of students in grades 8 and 11 scoring above the 25th, 50th, and 75th percentiles; percent of students in grade 4 scoring above the 25th and 50th percentiles	Percent of students taking SAT; percent scoring above 1,100	Percent of students taking Advanced Placement (AP) or college-level courses; percent of students scoring 3 or above on at least one AP test; percent of minority students earning the Advanced Studies Diploma	Percent of students and minority students for grades 7 through 12
West Virginia School Report Cards	Scores by sub-test for grades 3, 6, 9, and 11		Percent of students taking the SAT or ACT	Number of students taking Advanced Placement tests	Percent of students for grades 7 through 12

* Different nationally normed tests are in use. † ESL - English as a second language § LEP - Limited English Proficiency

Compiled by the Southern Regional Education Board.

that have been available for years, but most states have not collected individual student data. Many states are now investing in management information systems that will allow school, district, and state data to be compiled more easily.

These management information networks are costly, but necessary. A few states, including Florida and Texas, have already developed statewide systems that collect individual student records. South Carolina's system collects student data complied by school districts, but the state system does not include individual student records. Other states, including Alabama, Arkansas, Louisiana, and Tennessee, are beginning to develop more comprehensive data systems. With some of these new systems, schools and school districts are linked to the state and are able to use the data bases at both the state and local levels for making management decisions or for developing improvement plans.

The first states to publish school-by-school reports learned the importance of verifying data for accuracy. For example, Louisiana found it necessary to develop a data verification program after several problems were discovered in its first set of school profiles. The state did not have a consistent procedure for verifying information received from districts, and districts did not have procedures for assuring that the information sent to the state was correct. Additionally, errors were made because schools within a district did not always use the same system for reporting data. In 1992, the Louisiana legislature passed a provision that requires the State Board of Elementary and Secondary Education "to develop and implement an integrated information system for educational management."

Florida has worked for years to develop an information network and has created several methods to verify data. For example, Florida has reported verifiable dropout information by race and gender for several years. An education department staff person explains:

> *The data system allows individual students to be tracked. Taking a list of "no shows" identified by local officials, the information system can tell in minutes if those students are enrolled in another school in the state. Recently we found that about 55 percent of dropouts reported were not only enrolled, but were in school in the same district that listed them as "no shows." Another 12 percent were in the community college system.*

Issues Concerning Individual School Reporting

As states gain experience at school reporting, officials are finding that individual school information often tells a different story than district report. When data on smaller groups within a single school are identified, information that could be masked by examining only district data is brought to light. For example, in 1990-91 a Louisiana district reported that more than 6,000 students had been suspended–roughly 10 percent of the district's student population. But school-by-school breakdowns revealed that a single school had suspended almost 30 percent of its students. The relatively small numbers at the school level make accuracy and verification very important–a minor mistake in counting dropouts, for instance, could dramatically shift the dropout rate for a single school.

While describing Virginia's experience releasing school-by-school data, a staff person from the state department of education said:

> *For the first time, 380 individual high schools will be shown to the people of Virginia. I just left a division with four high schools, and this is a typical school division in the state. You can examine the data for the district as a whole and perhaps draw some conclusions. But when you look at the data for each individual high school,*

you find that no school is really described by the average data for the group.

While collecting and verifying data for individual schools is a large task, educators are finding it helpful to have reliable information about the school and for different groups of students within the school. Good data allow principals and teachers to identify weaknesses more accurately and target programs to address them. As one staff person remarked:

We found that the more you get into the data, the more you realize what you don't know. The amount of technical assistance and staff development needed to analyze the problems is significant. It also points out the need for technology in the schools. .

The Shift to Higher Standards

States are designing new assessments that shift from measuring *how students do compared to other students* to measuring *what students actually know and can do.* To accomplish this shift, states and local school systems must be able to collect new kinds of information that will help determine what students know and can do based on specific goals and outcome standards.

When states adopt new goals and standards, they discover that while information exists to measure progress toward some goals, adequate data are not always available to measure progress on others–especially in the area of student learning. As one state education staff member noted:

At first, we will only be able to report on some standards, but with the virtual explosion of assessment development nationwide, we hope to be able to match additional assessment methods to all the state standards.

Several states are developing new assessments and will select a base year against which future comparisons will be made. In Maryland, districts are using the 1991 results of the state's new assessment program as a baseline for their school reports. The 1992 individual school results of Kentucky's new assessment program will provide a benchmark schools are expected to exceed over the next two years. In Texas, the Academic Excellence Indicator System is collecting data from a newly expanded testing program and will show change from one year to the next.

SETTING STANDARDS

- Does the school report show how students are doing compared to what students should know and be able to do? Who sets these expectations?
- Does it show whether the school is doing better than last year? Five years ago?
- Are results shown for different groups of students in the school?

Will school reports include information that shows whether students are making progress toward agreed-upon standards? Will they allow comparison to students at other schools? Poll after poll reveals that a high percentage of the public has confidence in the school their children and neighbors attend, but they are very skeptical about the quality of other public schools. Would members of the public be more discerning about

school quality if they had access to school reports that accurately compared performance to common standards?

Higher Expectations for Student Performance

Initiatives are underway across the nation to define what students should know and be able to do and to determine "valued outcomes" for students and schools. The U.S. Department of Education has awarded grants to develop national standards in mathematics, science, history, the arts, civics, geography, and English by 1994-95. Groups such as the National Council of Teachers of Mathematics, the National Academy of Sciences, the Center for Civics Education, and the Music Educators National Conference–to name a few–are building these voluntary standards for the nation with cooperation from teachers, scholars, administrators, parents, and the public. The National Assessment of Educational Progress is expected to align its assessments with the subject area standards when they are adopted.

Alabama, Arkansas, Florida, Kentucky, Maryland, Oklahoma, South Carolina, Texas, and Virginia are defining outcomes for students and developing new student assessments. New legislation in Tennessee calls for the development of performance goals, including ways to measure the "value added" in districts, schools, and classes.

Maryland has described what students in the Maryland school system should know and has set new standards to measure what students are learning. Schools and districts are "graded" on their performance in relation to those standards. The Maryland "Schools for Success" Program, established in 1990, emphasizes the school and its responsibility in helping all students meet a set of state-defined standards. Rather than simply reporting currently existing data, the Maryland State Board of Education–through the work of state and local committees–identified areas that were important and set the specific standards. Maryland has taken the position that all children can learn, and the state requires all schools–regardless of socioeconomic status, demographics, or other factors–to meet standards within five years. In the interval, all schools must make progress:

> *The intent of the accountability program is school improvement, and we report on whether standards are met. All schools will be "graded" as either meeting or not meeting the standards. The City of Baltimore is held accountable for exactly the same standards as Montgomery County, Maryland. The fact that a school is a Chapter I school cannot be used as a reason to explain why the same standards should not be expected.*

The idea of looking ahead and working toward an established level of proficiency much higher than where students are now performing is a new idea for most states. The approach is contrary to the common practice of comparing student performance to some relatively unchallenging measure–such as meeting the national average score on a test normed several years before, or passing minimum competency tests where standards are so low that most students have no difficulty meeting them. Maryland has shifted its emphasis dramatically:

> *Until recently, we always looked backward–to the California Achievement Test normed in 1978 or the California Basic Skills Test in 1989. When we gave our functional test for graduation, we looked back to the standard set in the mid-1980s. The public is conditioned to always expect high performance the first time data are reported. We have flipped and gone the opposite way. Our standards are now set for the year 2000 and, therefore, schools are not meeting them in 1992. As it turns out, many districts are not meeting any of the standards.*

Both Texas and Kentucky have raised significantly the expectations they have for students. Texas has set high standards, such

as a graduation rate of 99 percent and a passing rate of 90 percent on state achievement tests. The latest state report shows none of the standards have been met. In Kentucky, students used to score about average on the nationally normed tests used to measure progress. New, tougher state assessments for grades 4, 8, and 12 in reading, mathematics, science, and social studies have found that only about 10 percent of students are "proficient." (Kentucky's performance level scale includes *novice*, *apprentice*, *proficient*, and *distinguished*.) The Kentucky Commissioner of Education observed:

> *American education has been shooting at baskets 6 feet high. Kentucky has decided to move up to world-class competition and to begin shooting at baskets that are 10 feet high.*

The recent decisions by states such as Kentucky, Maryland, and Texas to set higher standards have resulted in lower success rates for students. These results illustrate the danger in making simple comparisons to minimal requirements. When tests with low standards are used, most students appear to do well, and it is easy for educators and the public to become complacent about student performance. Knowing that a school's score on a given test is better or worse than a national group who took the test several years before doesn't tell us much about what students actually know and can do.

In addition to setting standards, several states report comparisons to how students perform nationally, statewide, or in other districts or schools. More than half of the SREB states do some type of "like" groupings (students who have similar socioeconomic characteristics) for comparisons–although most such grouping studies have thus far been limited to districts. Such groupings make it possible for evaluators to see if one school or district has been more successful than another in improving the performance of students with similar backgrounds. While this approach was developed as a way to end arguments about "apple and orange" comparisons, critics question whether the like-grouping approach implies that certain students are not expected to perform as well as others.

Who Sets Standards?

Who sets student performance standards? Who determines the "level of acceptable performance" for a school? There are those who argue that standards should be set locally by those closest to the learners so they reflect the needs and conditions of the community. Others argue for state standards that schools and districts can reach through flexible, locally developed plans. Nationally, the U.S. Department of Education is supporting the development of voluntary national standards in various subjects that states, districts, and schools can adopt.

Maryland used teams of state and local educators, parents, and business people to recommend standards for State Board of Education approval. Local districts can add other criteria to reflect local priorities.

Kentucky's Council on School Performance Standards, created by executive order in 1989, recommended six learning goals for all students. The Council created a number of task forces composed of teachers, school administrators, college faculty, and State Department of Education representatives. These task forces collected ideas from other educators and the public to define what students should know and be able to do. The result of this effort was to identify and describe 75 outcomes related to the six goals.

Florida's Commission on Education Reform and Accountability was charged with recommending standards to the State Board of Education and the legislature. A set of initial standards for the year 2000, developed after holding public hearings around the state, was approved by the State Board of Education. The Commission is now developing definitions of "adequate progress" to-

ward meeting the standards, as well as methods to assess the progress. The Commission emphasized the importance of setting state standards after listening to a wide variety of viewpoints–then letting districts decide how to best meet them. A Commission staff member described the process:

> *The Lieutenant Governor and the Commissioner of Education are co-chairs, which gives the Commission a definite high profile right off the bat. The members are legislators, teacher union leaders, superintendents, business persons, and parents. What that has done is bring various perspectives into the development of standards.*
>
> *We want to bring decision making back to the schools. We are concerned about setting state standards and assessing outcomes. We are not going to get involved in the process of how schools meet the standards. That has been a tough one, given the make-up of the Commission. They are all decision-makers.*

Progress Over Time for All Students

Most agree that reports must show the progress of students over time in order to measure how far a school has to go toward a goal. Louisiana, for example, will report five years of individual school data in its reports (as the data become available). South Carolina provides three years of data in its School Performance Reports. Maryland used 1990 as a baseline year, and its latest report includes both 1990 and 1991 data. In Virginia, data used in the 1992 school reports provide the baseline and will be used for determining progress in future reports. Florida's accountability system is being developed with the belief that "education accountability is not a one-time event, but an ongoing process of continuous quality improvement."

Another important issue is whether school-wide averages portray an accurate picture of progress toward meeting standards. In their accountability legislation and regulations, states recognize that "all children can learn." But can schools be judged successful when the student body as a whole reaches a certain standard, but particular groups of students within the school are not making adequate progress?

Several states, including Florida (in future reports), Maryland, and Texas, are reporting student performance by race/ethnicity and gender at individual schools. For example, Maryland can isolate test scores or attendance rates for Hispanic males, black females, and so forth. Students in one high school received a "satisfactory" rating because they had better than a 94 percent attendance rate. When the data were reviewed by race and gender, officials found that, while some groups of students exceeded the standard, others–including American Indian/Alaskan Native students, Hispanic students, and Asian/Pacific Islander females–failed to meet the 94 percent standard. A Florida Department of Education representative observes:

> *It becomes controversial when you report by gender and ethnic group. You will see that some of our finest counties have a very low dropout rate overall. But, until recently, no one has looked at the dropout rate among black males, and what we are finding is a high number. You can imagine the kind of attention that will raise.*

THE REPORT AND ITS USE

- Who uses the school report–who are the customers?
- Who decides what is included in the report? Does the report show what is important? Does it reflect community concerns?
- Is it easily understood and interesting to read? How can it be used for school improvement?

"Why are we reporting publicly? To whom are we reporting?" States are asking these questions in preparing individual school reports. The answers drive what will be reported. Most reports respond to state requirements to tell the public how schools are performing, and it follows that individual school reporting must be responsive to the community's need for clear, understandable, meaningful information. A Department of Education staff member in Maryland describes the issue like this:

> *If you want to know whether your report card is working, the question you should be asking is: Are the things in this report card the things the people in the community served by the school feel are important? If the answer is no, then you have not made the shift yet–you are still responding only to the state.*

Who are the customers? Schools? Parents? Businesses? Legislators? State policies point to the importance of being accountable to each of these groups as a *quid pro quo* for the flexibility that many schools now receive. Each of these groups has expectations that put pressure on the schools to improve student performance. States are finding that identifying the customers and isolating their needs help keep the list of reported items relatively short.

When reports are prepared by schools or districts, potential conflicts of interest can arise. As a former education reporter asked:

> *How do you give local districts the control they need to produce reports and still keep them honest? I have watched the reporting of school data over time, and I can tell you that some school systems are masters of "spin"—the spin they can put on data is really amazing. Smaller districts and others who don't have highly skilled public relations staffs don't come out with quite the same effect.*

What Should Be Reported?

Many of the early school reports were produced in response to legislation specifying information that must be included–as a minimum. The fact is that most states simply used available data. As states move beyond these initial reports, many are reporting additional information as it becomes available. But who determines what is important? In deciding what the reports should contain, some states have gathered public opinion. Maryland used state and local committees of educators, parents, and business people to decide what the state should focus on. Florida's Commission on Education Reform and Accountability held public hearings around the state. South Carolina has a history of very active participation from the business community in its accountability efforts.

Concerns of Parents. One parent, who is a former reporter and a public relations professional, describes his vision of a quality school report card. It would include back-

ground information on the school and the community–resources, family income, school spending–to put the school into perspective. The specific goals of the school and the indicators that are used to determine where the school is in relation to the goals would be clear, and everyone would know who set the goals. The report would include baseline and current data, and it would show clearly whether progress is being made toward meeting the goals among all students and among different groups of students. Finally, the report should be action-oriented:

> *What is the school going to do as a result of the data? What can I do as a parent to help the process? I would send out a report card to persons in the district with a response card asking if these goals match the reader's expectations. If they do or don't, why? And I would ask whether the reader understands the report card and has ideas about how it could be improved. Approach the issue like a business might approach customer relations.*

State and Community Needs. States need to develop a format for individual school reports that provides consistent data from one school and district to the next–while still responding to the unique features of each community. In Florida, schools will conform to a standard format for each kind of school–elementary, middle/junior high, senior high school, and adult and vocational. This will allow comparisons to statewide and district performance measures. Because of the support for customized school reports, schools may have the opportunity to create an insert to address the additional needs and interests of the community.

Maryland districts report on state standards that are appropriate to various kinds of schools. In one district, for example, school reports were nearly identical to the state report. In addition, each school provided information that was unique or required extra attention in the section, "School Improvement Highlights and Notes." As districts gain more experience in the reporting process, district-designed formats may replace the state design, says one state education official.

> *We are hoping educators will take their individual report cards and get out in the communities and invite the communities in. It should not matter that there are elements of a report card for school "A" that are different than those for a school that is only five blocks away. We should be encouraging schools to define themselves in ways that reflect community involvement.*

In South Carolina, at least two types of reports, in addition to the state report, are produced. School and district improvement reports include some required information but are customized to reflect the needs of the community. School performance reports, produced by the State Department of Education, are provided in a standardized format.

Business Perspective. What does business want in a school report? A business person reflected on that question:

> *We give a lot of rhetoric to this business of accountability and the importance of assessment. Business is very cost-conscious and taxpayers look at the bottom line. We want to know what are we getting for our investment of our tax dollars.*
>
> *We also talk a lot about the importance of knowing how well children are being prepared and how well students are doing because our usual argument is that we depend on the schools for the quality of our work force. On the other hand, do we really use the information that is there? No, we really don't.*
>
> *Perhaps if we really had better district and better school data and report cards, there would be widespread use of them by the community. If they were seen as something consistent, that everybody looked to and had confidence in, it would help businesses.*

The reports should show progress—whether that's improvement or decline over time relating to school goals. One thing that educators might consider is asking business people to help develop some of these report cards so that they will then be useful to businesses and to the community people as well as to the educators.

School Improvement. The school itself is one important customer of individual school reports. While many will argue that principals and teachers have access to all sorts of data on their students, few can say that the data pertinent to school improvement have been presented in a clear, concise format that reflects goals and allows progress to be tracked. Access to this kind of information is becoming increasingly important as decision-making responsibility shifts from the state to schools. The results of these individual school reports have the potential to be of great benefit to school improvement plans required in several states. Perspectives on whether data are actually used by schools is mixed. One former principal describes a successful situation:

We have a student data base in all of our schools. For seven years we have been reporting all these kinds of information in terms of critical performance. We have a standard reporting system, a standard definition system, and a standard verification system. Schools use the information to come up with their plans of improvement every year. It is now part of the natural course.

Every piece of data except one was already available . . . but the report card made a huge difference because it made the data more accessible.

On the other hand, another state official noted:

We have had school improvement councils since 1977. We have yet to find a way to present the data to councils so it's used in their planning system. Some principals in the state make good use of the data, but too many do not.

Designing a Useful Report

The challenge is to create a format for the school report that makes it easy to understand and interesting to read. Maryland state officials have found that people often pay more attention to the state report than school reports because it is done attractively with color and graphics. School reports may need an equally attractive, accessible layout to encourage wide readership.

One lesson that may provide guidance in school reporting comes from the experience of South Carolina in preparing the state report, *What is the Penny Buying for South Carolina?* (a reference to the state's one-cent sales tax increase for education). Each year, the report's authors reduced 600 pages of data to no more than 75 pages. The 75-page report was then distilled into a five-page executive summary and a two-page brochure. The authors found that the brochure was used most often by legislators and businesses. To make the report look "catchy" and interesting to read, an outside advertising agency was hired. As one staff person put it:

There are three things important to a report: First, deciding what you are going to report; second, getting and verifying the data; third and possibly most important, making the report look interesting and easy to read. It may be difficult for schools to make the reports short and catchy, but if they don't, they have wasted their time on the preparation. We live in an MTV era. People live on 30-second sound bites. While educators thrive on long explanatory reports, legislators and parents don't. They just want to know if students are learning.

In some states, such as Louisiana and West Virginia, the state departments of education prepare standardized individual school reports that are sent to each school for distribution to parents. These are brief

versions of more involved district or statewide reports and are usually on the front and back of one page. Measures of school performance are included with state and district results. West Virginia's reports include an area for schools to provide notes unique to that school.

Using the Reports

Is it enough for school reports simply to be prepared and distributed? Who interprets the reports? School reports are a part of a larger school improvement and accountability effort, where the focus has shifted from trying to solve an isolated problem to making continuous improvement. The report is not an end in itself; the spinoffs are most important: improved performance, increased college-going rates, better preparation to enter the work force, and community and business involvement. The fact is—people work harder when they know they are being watched. As one person put it:

> *What gets measured gets taught. What gets reported gets taught twice as well.*

Simply producing a report is not enough. States are finding these reports bring to light policy issues and needs that must be addressed. As strengths and weaknesses become apparent, there must be a vehicle for taking action. A parent receives her child's report card, sees where difficulties lie, and maps out a plan of action for improving the weak areas. But when the same parent receives the child's school report, the response may be, "How does this impact my child? What can I do about it?" Teachers, too, are often not involved with school data and decision making, and they also need a structure to work within.

But who really interprets the data and sets the stage for action by educators or policymakers? The press? Local school councils or PTAs? Parents who can understand and act on the information? One parent, who has also been a reporter, says:

> *The school report card should be of such a quality that a parent sitting at home who is a business person, or a journalist, or in sales can look at the report and have some sense of what needs to be done in the school. Somehow we need to provide some objective interpretation of the data that lay people can grasp. Some report writers leave it to the press to decide what the data mean. That is a very dangerous practice.*

Schools will have to set up structures to help parents, business, and the general public interpret and do something about the results. As an example, one high school principal in Louisiana sent home the school's progress profile with a letter highlighting the school's nearly average test scores and low attendance results compared to those of the district. The letter urged parents to see that their children were in school every day. In the letter, the principal explained:

> *Of particular concern is our student attendance. Our attendance rate for last year was 88 percent compared to 95 percent for our district.*
>
> *We feel that test scores are directly related to attendance, among other things. A student cannot do well on tests if he or she is absent for much of the instruction. Statistics prove that students who score well on tests are in attendance more than students who do not score well.*

Schools in some states have set up advisory councils that include parents, teachers, and others to work with the principal in looking at assessment results. Similar councils in South Carolina use the results in their school improvement plans. Florida schools, too, will create councils to work in an advisory capacity with the principal on implementing the accountability program and looking at results. Mississippi legislation passed in 1992 requires city and county governments to develop five-year plans to encourage community involvement in the schools. Additionally, the State Board of

Education is to establish an awards program to reward parents for becoming involved in school improvement efforts.

Whether teachers and principals use the reported information often depends on their authority to make decisions and ability to change the way they teach. In some states, site-based decision making is an integral part of the school improvement effort. These states need to train principals and teachers to use the data included in school reports to make decisions.

With the advent of site-based decision making comes the need for a shift in state emphasis. State departments of education move away from a predominantly regulatory role to one that is more supportive in nature. A number of states are going through this process. These states are assisting districts and schools in the development and implementation of school improvement plans.

As local schools take on more responsibility and accountability, many observers feel more attention must be given to staff development. As one state education official described:

> *You need to train school personnel to make a diagnosis and write a prescription at the building level. If you don't fill the prescription, that is, if the central office and the state department are not in turn responsive by providing vehicles for professional development to change the people in the schools, you are going to see a lot of frustrated people and you are not going to see many improvements.*

States are also using accountability and reporting programs to reward and recognize successful schools. One objective of Louisiana's reporting program, created in the Children First Act of 1988, is to "help identify those schools showing significant improvement so they can be rewarded by the School Improvement Program." More recent laws in Kentucky (1990) and Tennessee (1992) also call for financial rewards for schools exceeding expectations. In Florida, the accountability commission suggested recognizing schools that make progress but did not recommend financial incentives. Mississippi's 1992 reform legislation calls for the State Board of Education to design a program of recognition awards for exemplary high schools.

Schools that fail to make progress can also be identified and singled out for additional assistance. South Carolina's school intervention program has been in place since the mid-1980s. The accountability commission in Florida recommended that schools failing to make progress within three years be reported to the State Board of Education. In the intervening years, school advisory councils, with local board assistance, must develop plans for improving weak areas. Kentucky, too, requires plans for improving weaknesses at the individual school. Also, schools will be eligible to receive grants from a school improvement fund to improve instruction, receive assistance from "distinguished educators," replicate successful programs, and encourage the use of experimental programs.

In Tennessee, as in several other states, districts can be placed on probation for failure to achieve the rate of progress required by the State Board of Education. During the first year of probation, the state education department will recommend ways for the school system to improve. Should the system remain on probation for more than two years, the Commissioner and State Board of Education may remove school board members and the superintendent from office.

THE LESSONS LEARNED

These early efforts to prepare effective individual school reports make it clear that accountability reporting is but one part of an overall educational improvement effort. Simply describing outcomes without also designing ways to use the results will be of little benefit.

The individual school is the most important unit in accountability and improvement systems. One person described it like this:

> *We can design a premier accountability system, but unless there is something happening at the individual school, it is not worth anything. You have to get as close to the children as possible and there must be as much emphasis on the improvement process as there is on the accountability system itself.*

The experience of SREB states that are producing individual school accountability reports provides these insights:

- ✔ Individual school reports can serve two primary purposes: school improvement *and* school accountability.
- ✔ There needs to be broad consensus on what is reported, and plans need to be made to gather necessary data. At present, what is reported too often is simply what is available.
- ✔ States must develop consensus on a standard of acceptable performance. Public awareness is essential as states move to "higher standards."
- ✔ Ownership and cooperation are vital to success. Educators, parents, businesses, and the community should be involved in school improvement and accountability efforts.
- ✔ A core of comparable data is needed, as well as unique information that reflects the character of each school.
- ✔ School reports should include multiple years of data on student performance to show progress over time.
- ✔ Collecting and verifying individual school data are critical because issues and problems are magnified at the school level.
- ✔ Reports should show results for different groups within the school, including information by race/ethnicity and gender.
- ✔ School reports should be "customer friendly"–easily understood by parents, community members, and government and school leaders.
- ✔ Interpretation of the data in reports is important. Educators, parent, and other community members need clearly established ways to react to and use reports.
- ✔ When looking at progress in student achievement, there must be a shift in perspective–from solving a single, isolated problem to viewing improvement as a process that never ends.
- ✔ The real litmus test is action in every school–school reporting should result in continuous improvement based on student performance.

Maintaining public support and assuring educational accountability will become increasingly crucial as states shift decision-making responsibilities to local schools. "Report cards" can be important tools in measuring progress toward goals and in the public's understanding of how students are performing. The Southern Regional Education Board will continue to promote cooperation and assistance among member states as they develop, implement, and refine their school accountability programs.